

## **On Measuring Life With Coffee Spoons**

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](#) at  
<http://archiveofourown.org/works/256219>.

### **Rating:**

[Mature](#)

### **Archive Warning:**

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### **Category:**

[M/M](#)

### **Fandom:**

[My Chemical Romance](#)

### **Relationship:**

[Frank Iero/Gerard Way](#)

### **Character:**

[Gerard Way](#), [Frank Iero](#), [Mikey Way](#)

### **Additional Tags:**

[Alternate Universe - Modern Setting](#)

### **Stats:**

Published: 2011-09-22 Words: 7475

# **On Measuring Life With Coffee Spoons**

by [iamtheenemy\\_\(Steph\)](#).

## Summary

“Venti mocha frappuccino, no whipped cream,” Frank said with a grin. Gerard noticed he was wearing the nametag with the little blue vampire drawn next to the K. It was Gerard’s favorite. Barista!AU featuring socially awkward! Gerard and trying-too-hard! Frank.

## Notes

Thanks to dracopet and softlyforgotten for the betas and dracopet for tossing this idea around with me. Title from T.S. Eliot.

Gerard walked into Starbucks for the first time that day. He was on his lunch break, which wasn't like most lunch breaks since Gerard painted at home or in his studio. Instead, it was more Brian forcing him to stop working for an hour and eat something, not that his lunch break involved eating much food.

Gerard had been annoyed at first, but over the past couple of months, he'd begun enjoying his lunch breaks. Looking forward to them, even.

"Hey!" the barista - Frank, his name was Frank - said when Gerard took his turn at the counter.

If Gerard was honest with himself, Frank was the reason for his sudden interest in leaving his studio. He was also probably the reason for Gerard's newfound addiction to corporation coffee.

"Hey," Gerard said, ducking his head so that his hair fell in front of his face. "I'll take..."

"Venti mocha frappuccino, no whipped cream," Frank said with a grin. Gerard noticed he was wearing the nametag with the little blue vampire drawn next to the K. It was Gerard's favorite.

"Yeah," Gerard said. He reminded himself not to get excited that Frank recognized his order. Last week, Frank had recited it and then followed up with the orders of the next two people in line behind Gerard. Gerard was no one special.

He paid for his drink and stuffed a dollar into the tip jar. Leaning over the counter under the guise of being impatient for his coffee, Gerard studied Frank's tattoos. He

had them all over his arms, hands and neck and they were beautiful, but Gerard's favorite was the saint that stretched across Frank's left elbow. Her eyes were hollow and she held her broken heart in her hands as swords pierced it.

"Mocha frap?"

Gerard jerked out of his reverie to see Frank holding out his coffee expectantly.

"Oh, um, thanks."

"Which one are you looking at?" Frank asked when Gerard took the cup from his hands. He twisted his colorful arm towards Gerard.

Gerard felt his face flush at having been caught staring.  
"The, uh, the saint?"

"That's the Lady of Sorrows," Frank replied. "Got her the day after I graduated from my Catholic high school."

"She looks sad," Gerard said, before he could stop himself.

"Really?" Frank asked, frowning. "She's supposed to be bad ass."

"That too," Gerard said quickly. It was true, she had zombie eyes and looked like she could fuck you up. "You went to Catholic school?"

"From kindergarten up," Frank confirmed. "It fucking sucked. What about you?"

"Public," Gerard mumbled. Just the memory of high school was enough to make him clam up.

"Was it any better on your side of the fence?" Frank asked.

"Definitely not," Gerard said. The silence stretched out awkwardly until Gerard picked up his coffee and prepared to leave. "Thanks."

"Do you have any?" Frank asked.

Gerard frowned, confused. He put the coffee back on the counter. "Have what?"

"Any tattoos, sorry," Frank clarified.

"No," Gerard said, shaking his head. "I'm afraid of needles."

"Oh, well it's not that bad. You get used to it."

"I wouldn't get used to it. I wish I could because I love the idea of tattoos," Gerard said. He could feel himself winding up and warming to the subject. "I mean, look at yours, they're beautiful. All these pictures, and they all mean something to you. Like, this cobra." He touched the cobra visible on Frank's arm for emphasis and then trailed over to the words ringing Frank's wrist. "*And I wish I were a ghost* - that means something to you. I've tried using Sharpies sometimes, when I have something that I want to say, but it's not the same. Your body is a collage of your whole life for anyone to see. Like hieroglyphs on your skin. Do you know what I'm saying?"

"What? Yeah, yeah, no that makes sense," Frank said, staring down at the counter.

Gerard followed his gaze to where his hand was wrapped tightly around Frank's wrist, covering the red words.

"Oh, shit, I'm sorry!" Gerard cried, hastily pulling his hand away.

"No, it's okay!" Frank replied.

He jerked forward, probably to try and make Gerard feel better about being a complete creep, and his elbow knocked over Gerard's coffee. They both fumbled for it, hands colliding, before it fell off the counter and on the floor at Gerard's feet.

Frank grabbed a fistful of napkins and hopped over the counter, bending down to clean up the spill.

"I'm so sorry, god. I'll make you another one, okay? Fuck, motherfucker."

Gerard picked up the empty cup, tried to shovel some of the drink back into it and dumped the whole thing in the garbage.

"It's okay," Gerard said, edging towards the door and away from another one of his ridiculous social blunders. "I didn't mean to touch you. I don't know what I was thinking. I'm going now. Okay, bye."

He practically ran out of the store, ignoring Frank calling after him about a refund.

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He ended up at Starbucks the next day at eight that night, because Mikey forced him to go after he told him what happened the day before. He had the biggest meddling, pain in the ass brother in the world. Mikey was lucky Gerard loved him so fucking much, otherwise he would have been moved to fratricide years ago.

They went out together most evenings, either for food or coffee. Mikey claimed that he liked to make sure that

Gerard was still alive at the end of the day, which was pretty fucking ironic coming from the guy that once took a shower with a space heater because he ran out of hot water.

"What band are you seeing tonight?" Gerard asked when they walked in. He very intently didn't look at the counter where Frank watched them approach.

"Some neo-indie pop punk thing from Camden," Mikey answered. "I don't remember the name."

"How was that band from last night? The one with the female bassist?" Gerard asked. Mikey was always good about turning Gerard on to all the good underground music that wouldn't be underground for long, thanks to his job at Eyeball Records.

"Pretty good, actually. Kind of generic, but the singer went fucking crazy and the bassist was hot, so."

Gerard shot Mikey a shrewd look, "You totally hooked up with her."

Mikey shrugged, unrepentant. "She's coming with me tonight."

"You don't think it's an abuse of power to fuck members of the band you're supposed to be scouting?" Gerard asked.

"I was gonna set up a meeting for them anyway," Mikey answered.

"Still, did *she* know that?" Gerard asked.

Mikey rolled his eyes. "If she didn't want it, she would have kicked me in the balls and called it a day."

“I agree.”

Gerard jerked around and realized that Frank was watching him and Mikey argue at the counter.

“Um...” Gerard said, immediately losing the thread of the conversation and feeling his face heat.

“Chicks in bands are fucking fierce,” Frank said.

“Frank agrees with me, Gee,” Mikey said.

“Especially Jersey girls,” Frank nodded, and then, “‘Gee’? Is that short for something?”

“Gerard,” Gerard said, eyes focused on the drink of the day board directly over Frank’s right shoulder.

“Cool,” Frank said, grinning bright enough that Gerard could see it from the corner of his eye. “Sorry about yesterday, I’m so fucking clumsy. This one’s free, okay? Since you didn’t get to drink your last one.”

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“You haven’t even told him your name?” Mikey asked when they sat down.

Gerard glanced around at the near-empty store and hissed, “Shut up, asshole, he’ll hear you! And no, why would I?”

“You know his,” Mikey pointed out.

“Yeah, because he wears a fucking *nametag*,” Gerard said.

“So was your plan just to keep coming in here to touch him inappropriately and stare like a stalker every day?” Mikey asked.

"I don't!" Gerard said.

Mikey pointedly looked down at the closed sketchbook in Gerard's hands, which they both knew was filled with pencil drawings of Frank and his tattoos. Gerard had nothing to say to that, so he kept his mouth shut and edged the book closer to his body.

"All I'm saying," Mikey continued, "is that if a dude was spending all of his free time drawing me, I'd at least like to know his name."

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Gerard didn't really spend all his free time drawing Frank. Well, not technically, since what he was actually doing was working on the final piece for his gallery showing the next month.

That night when he got back to his apartment, he sketched the Lady of Sorrows holding a lit bomb in her outstretched palm, with the words 'I'm so sorry' hovering behind her. He added it to his pile, on top of the picture of Frankenstein holding a chainsaw. Somehow, Gerard would make them all fit together.

And if, maybe, he had an ongoing fantasy where he and Frank fought crime together *X-Men*-style (he was telekinetic and Frank was a pyro), and if he sketched some quick panels of the more interesting storylines, well. Mikey didn't have to know that.

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Gerard avoided Starbucks the next day, since Mikey wasn't around to drag him there. Instead, he stayed in his apartment and sketched out the lettering of the

“Halloween” on Frank’s fingers, experimenting with different colors to find the perfect shade of orange.

He could admit to himself that it was a little pathetic.

On Thursday, Mikey said that he wanted coffee and snorted when Gerard tried to get out of it. Gerard didn’t know how he got stuck with such a smug prick of a kid brother.

When they walked in, Frank grinned and waved at them as he moved around his workstation.

“Gerard, where were you yesterday?” He frowned. “You didn’t cave and try Caribou, did you? Those motherfuckers are a cheap imitation. Oh, excuse me, ma’am,” Frank said to the scandalized looking middle-aged woman waiting for her coffee.

Mikey gave Gerard a shove with his bony shoulder and Gerard lurched forward, and then turned to glare at Mikey.

“Just didn’t feel like coffee,” Gerard answered.

“Oh, man, well you scared the shit - sorry, ma’am, tall vanilla cappuccino. Have a nice day - out of me. I wanted to call you and make sure you weren’t lying in a gutter or something, and then I remembered that I didn’t have your number.”

“No, haha,” Gerard said awkwardly. “No, you don’t.” Beside him, Mikey made a choked noise that Gerard chose to ignore.

“But you haven’t been eaten by zombies or anything, so I guess it doesn’t matter. The usual?”

“Yeah,” Gerard said.

"Same for me," Mikey said.

"Okay, cool. That's \$10.34," Frank said.

Gerard looked at Mikey, who asked, "What?"

"You're the one who wanted to come here, so you can at least pay."

Mikey rolled his eyes. "Cheap fucker. You make twice as much as I do." He handed Frank a twenty.

"It's the principle," Gerard defended.

"The principle of you being a cheap ass?" he asked innocently, and then stuffed the change Frank handed him into his pocket. When Frank started making their drinks, Mikey gave Gerard an exasperated look.

"Don't," Gerard said.

"He *doesn't have your number*, are you kidding me?" he said.

"Mikey, I've come in here at least once a day for the last three months, of course he was worried about me. It doesn't mean anything."

"You're so stupid," Mikey said wonderingly.

"Mind your own fucking business. I don't stick my nose in yours."

"Except to give me a speech about how I'm 'abusing my position of power' when I fuck the people that I want to," Mikey pointed out.

"That's different," Gerard argued. He shut up quickly when Frank walked over with their drinks.

"Here you go," he said.

"Thanks," Mikey said.

They found a seat next to the windows.

"How was that band from Tuesday? The neo-indie whatever?" Gerard asked.

"Sucked," Mikey said. "The lead singer was so drunk he could barely stand up, and he didn't have any charisma to pull it off."

"And the hot bassist?" Gerard asked.

"Alicia?" Mikey said. "She was fun. I'll probably call her again." Gerard raised his eyebrows. Mikey saying he'd call someone again was high praise. "You're still coming to the show tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah, why, is she going to be there?" Gerard asked.

"Probably. I just want to make sure you don't punk out on me like the last two times," Mikey said.

"I was *working*," Gerard said, which was true for the first time, if not for the second. He hadn't seen all four *Nightmare on Elm Street* movies back to back since he was a teenager, though. If Mikey hadn't had work, Gerard would have invited him over.

"So you're coming tomorrow? You swear?" Mikey asked.

"Yes, fuck, fine," Gerard said. "What is it tomorrow?"

"Local metal bands, three or four of them," Mikey answered. "Should be pretty good."

"As long as it's not any of that Backstreet Boys shit," Gerard said.

Mikey sighed. "Jesus, that was *one time*, and I didn't know the band was gonna be like that. Get over it."

Gerard was over it, but he never missed an opportunity to give Mikey shit. He took a long, sloppy sip of his drink and said, "Do you know if Ray's - "

"Hey, Frank!" Mikey yelled, cutting him off.

"Yeah?" Frank asked.

"What are you doing?" Gerard whispered frantically.  
"Mikey, what the fuck are you doing?"

"Gerard and I are going to see a metal show at Maxwell's tomorrow, want to come?"

Frank beamed at them and Gerard felt his breath catch.  
"You guys are going to that? Seriously? My band's playing!"

Gerard thought for a minute that his heart actually stopped, and even Mikey looked comically surprised.

"Really? Which band?" Mikey asked.

"Collateral Damage. I play guitar," Frank answered. "We're on last, so we can hang out before that."

"Yeah, cool," Mikey said. "Let's exchange numbers so we can call you when we get there. My cell phone's kind of shitty though, we'll give you Gerard's instead."

"My phone's in my jacket pocket, let me grab it." Frank went off into the backroom.

"What the *fuck*," Gerard said when he was gone.

"Hey, you don't have to call him, right? But at least now he has your number, even though you were too much of a pussy to give it to him yourself."

"I can't hang out with him," Gerard said desperately. Just the thought of it was making him feel like he wanted to throw up.

"Why not?" Mikey asked.

"Because he's...he's..." Gerard couldn't summon words to describe the way he saw Frank, his presence.

"Okay, got it," Frank said, coming back in and waving a Sidekick in the air.

"Oh *god*," Gerard moaned.

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Later that night, Gerard worked on carefully recreating the scorpion tattooed on Frank's neck. He had an idea about combining that and the bats on Frank's arm to make some really fucked up Frank Miller-type shit. It was gonna be awesome.

He had Iron Maiden playing, some of their earlier stuff, and a cigarette that was slowly dying in his left hand. He hissed when the ashes fell off the cherry and burned his thumb. Putting out the cigarette in an already overflowing ashtray, he carefully wiped away the ashes that scattered on his sketch before lighting another one.

When his phone rang, it barely registered over the music until it hit voicemail. Gerard fumbled around on his desk, coming up with the phone after the ringing stopped. He clicked on the button to view missed calls and choked on the drag he took off his cigarette at the same time.

Frank.

He stared at the phone and willed it to tell him that he had a voicemail, but nothing happened. What should he do? Should he call Frank back? What if Frank accidentally hit the wrong number and only realized when he came to Gerard's voicemail message?

He decided to ignore it, but kept the phone next to his elbow, just in case.

Half an hour later, when Iron Maiden switched over to the Smashing Pumpkins, the phone rang again. Gerard jumped out of his chair and turned down the radio before taking a deep breath.

"Hello?" he greeted.

"Hi, Gerard?" Frank's voice came through the line.

Gerard took a calming drag from his cigarette and answered, "Yes."

"Gerard, hey. This is Frank. From Starbucks."

"Oh, hey. Why are you calling?" Gerard asked.

"I'm sorry, are you busy?" Frank asked. "I could call back later..."

Gerard rubbed his eyes with fingers. "No, no! I just meant, you know..." He looked up at the ceiling in despair. "What's up?"

"Okay. It's not that important, though, if you wanted..."

"I'm not busy," Gerard repeated. "Sorry."

"Well, I was thinking that if you wanted, I could put you and Mikey on the list at the door if you give me your last names," Frank said. "For tomorrow night."

"You don't need to do that," Gerard said.

"It's no big deal," Frank said.

"No, I mean, Mikey's already got us on the list. He works for Eyeball Records and they get him in," Gerard answered.

"Oh," Frank said. "Okay. So then I'll see you guys there?"

"Yeah," Gerard said.

"Okay," Frank said again. "Um, and one more thing? About Monday?"

Gerard winced. "I'm sorry about that. Sometimes I don't pay attention to what I'm doing and how it might be weird for other people."

"No, I told you, it's okay. I mean, I'm used to people touching my tattoos. It happens kind of a lot. It wasn't weird. I just thought that you were maybe embarrassed about it, and that was why you didn't stop in on Wednesday."

"You wouldn't be the first person I accidentally freaked out just by being myself," Gerard admitted. Hell, Frank

wouldn't even be the *tenth*.

"You didn't freak me out," Frank said softly. "I like you."

Gerard's heart started beating faster even though he *knew* that Frank didn't mean it in the way Gerard wanted him to. "That's good. I - I like you too, Frank," Gerard said. "So we'll see you tomorrow then?"

"Yeah, tomorrow."

"Bye, Frank."

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When Friday night came around, Gerard fidgeted with his Black Flag hoodie, tugging on the strings and waiting for Mikey to pick him up.

The first thing Mikey said when Gerard got into the car was, "Dude, did you shower?"

"Fuck off," Gerard said, pulling the hood up over his clean hair and slumping down into the passenger seat.

"No, it's good!" Mikey said. "You're making an effort. I'm so proud of you. I think I might be tearing up a little."

"God, Mikey, fuck off," Gerard repeated.

Mikey laughed and started the car. People didn't know it by looking at him, but Mikey was a ridiculously safe driver. The kid never met a speed limit sign that he couldn't follow exactly. Usually it made Gerard crazy, but this time he appreciated it, since it meant they'd probably get to Maxwell's at right around closing time.

"Put your seatbelt on," Mikey said. "So did Frank call you?"

Gerard crossed his arms over his chest and didn't say anything.

Mikey cackled. "He totally did! I knew he would. Yo, put your seat belt on, dude."

"Fine, fine, *Dad*," Gerard grumbled, pulling the belt down and clipping it into place. "He wanted our last names to put us on the list." He left out the end of their conversation, because Mikey would make a big deal out of it when Gerard knew it wasn't.

"And?" Mikey prompted.

"And I told him that we were already on the list," Gerard answered.

"*Gee*," Mikey said.

"What?" Gerard asked, but Mikey shook his head.

"Never mind. I'm calling Ray. He's meeting us," Mikey said.

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"Did you shower?" Ray asked when he saw Gerard, and Mikey started to laugh.

"Oh my god, I hate both of you," Gerard said.

"He's trying to impress Frank with his flowing locks," Mikey said, still snickering.

"Who's Frank? The Starbucks guy? Is he coming here?" Ray asked.

"Yeah, apparently he's in Collateral Damage," Mikey said.

“Oh, wait, you mean Frankie *Iero*?” Ray asked. “I know him. Really fucking annoyingly energetic, but he’s a good guy and an awesome guitarist. Goes crazy on stage. Wait, Frank Iero is Gerard’s Starbucks guy?”

“Have you guys been talking about this?” Gerard demanded.

Ray put up his hands defensively. “Mikey just told me you were stalking some guy that worked at Starbucks.”

“I’m not stalking anyone,” Gerard grumbled.

“That’s good, because the guy you’re not stalking is coming over here right now,” Mikey said.

Gerard burrowed further down into his hoodie and tried to concentrate on breathing normally. He hadn’t considered what Frank would look like outside of his Starbucks uniform, which was a huge oversight on his part.

Frank wore a tight black *Meat is Murder* t-shirt, ripped jeans and a lip ring that he must not have been able to wear at work. Holy shit, he was the single hottest thing Gerard had ever seen.

“You’re here!” Frank cried. “That fucking rules! Toro, Bob’s been screaming for you for ten minutes. There’s this vein popping out of his forehead, which is actually pretty hilarious...”

“Shit, I gotta go. Talk to you guys later?” Ray didn’t wait for Gerard or Mikey to answer as he jogged towards the other end of the venue.

“You know Ray?” Frank asked.

That was an easy one, Gerard should have been able to answer it, but his tongue felt like it was glued to the roof of his mouth.

"We all went to the same high school," Mikey responded instead. "He and Gerard are the same age."

"Is that so, Mikey Way?" Frank asked pointedly. "Yeah, that's right, I know all about you. You're the brass we're all trying to impress tonight."

Mikey shrugged. "I guess. I'm just here to see a good show." His phone beeped and he pulled it out of his pocket to look at the screen. "Alicia's here. I'm gonna go get her in. I'll be back in like ten minutes."

Gerard watched Mikey's retreating back with a sense of utter doom.

"So," Frank said, coming to stand in front of him. "What is it you do for a living, Gerard? I mean, you already know about both of my jobs."

Gerard laughed weakly. "I'm, um, I'm an artist."

Frank whistled. "Really? What kind of art?"

"Paintings mostly. Some graphic novels." *Oh, and I've been drawing you a lot lately. Still not freaked out?*

Frank's eyes lit up. "Comic books? Oh shit, that's so awesome! I love comics. *Batman, Doom Patrol, X-Men*, all that."

"Yeah?" Gerard asked resignedly. Of course Frank liked comics. *Of course* he did.

"You do anything I'd know?" Frank asked.

Gerard shook his head. "The graphic novel stuff is mostly for fun. I'm working on this idea about this superhero family, though, that I think might go somewhere."

Frank put up his hand. "Wait, before you tell me all about it, let's sit down. We can get a seat near the door so we don't miss Mikey come back in."

Gerard let Frank lead him to a table a corner with a clear view of the entrance. Then he explained the whole concept that had been knocking around in his head for months to Frank. When he finished talking, he looked down at his phone to see that almost twenty minutes had passed. "Wow, sorry."

Frank shook his head, grinning. "That sounds so cool. You have to bring it into Starbucks when you finish it. I expect a copy as a thank you for my awesome frappuccino-making skills."

"I will, definitely," Gerard said, feeling himself smiling back.

Frank stood up and pulled a few crumbled bills from the pocket of his jeans. "I'm gonna run and grab a beer, do you want me to get you one too?"

The smile slid off of Gerard's face and he looked down at his hands. "No, thanks. I don't drink."

"Like, at all?" Frank asked.

"Yeah," Gerard said.

"Okay. Well, I'm sorry if I offended you or..."

"You didn't," Gerard said quickly.

Frank stared at Gerard a minute, and then said, "Fuck it, forget the beer." He sat back down.

"No, you don't have to - I don't mind if..." Gerard stuttered.

Frank waved his hand to brush away Gerard's protests. "All I really need is a cigarette anyway. You don't mind if I smoke, do you?"

"Only if I can bum one," Gerard answered.

"Sure," Frank said. He reached into the other pocket and pulled out a half-full pack of Camel Lights. He pulled one out, put the filter to his lips and lit it before passing it to Gerard.

"Thanks," Gerard said, trying not to seem like too much of a girl as he pressed the filter to his own lips.

Frank lit another cigarette for himself. He took a deep drag and sighed, letting the smoke stream from his mouth and nose. "What do you usually smoke?"

"Marlboro Lights," Gerard said.

"Mmm," Frank agreed. "As long as you aren't one of those menthol smokers."

"God no," Gerard said fervently.

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He didn't have to ask what took Mikey so long when he showed up with a girl on his arm ten minutes later. His hair was mussed and she had a streak of eyeliner running down her cheek.

“Get distracted?” Gerard asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Something like that,” Mikey answered. “This is Alicia. Alicia, this is my brother, Gerard, and our friend, Frank.”

Alicia shook their hands and gave Gerard an appraising look as she and Mikey sat down. “So you’re the crazy artist brother, huh?”

“I guess,” Gerard said.

“Dude, Gee’s amazing,” Mikey said. “He somehow convinces, like, old ladies and stuffy art critics and shit to buy, like, paintings of vampire aliens invading Earth. And he’s got this huge gallery showing in a few weeks.”

“What?” Frank said, turning to Gerard. “When is this?”

Gerard played it off. “It’s not a big deal or anything.”

Mikey scoffed. “He’s only been trying to get it off the ground for the last year and a half.”

“Come on, where’s it gonna be at?” Frank asked, knocking his shoulder into Gerard’s. “I want to see the vampire aliens.”

“The gallery on Fillmore,” Mikey piped up, and Gerard sent him a quelling glare. Gerard would die if Frank saw what he’d been working on for the last couple of weeks.

“It’s not...it’s invite only, so...” Gerard said, feeling like an asshole.

“Oh, okay,” Frank said. “It’s cool. I mean, you’re still bringing that comic book in for me to see when you finish it, right?”

“Definitely,” Gerard promised.

“Awesome,” Frank said, standing up abruptly. “I’m gonna go help Bob and Ray set up for tonight, make sure no one messes with my shit. I’ll see you guys after though, right? You’ll stick around?”

“We’ll be here for a while,” Mikey agreed.

“All right, cool,” Frank said, loping away towards the stage.

When he was far enough away, Gerard laid his head on the sticky tabletop. “Oh my god,” he moaned.

“You’re an idiot,” Mikey said as Alicia patted him on the shoulder.

“You just had to bring up the showing, didn’t you?” Gerard said.

“I’m trying to help you,” Mikey said.

“Great. Thanks for all your help,” Gerard said, his voice muffled in the wood.

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Ray wasn’t kidding when he said that Frank went crazy on stage. Over the course of the first two songs, he collided with the bassist, jumped on top of the drum riser and licked a long stripe from the lead singer’s jaw up to his hairline.

He spit into the crowd and screamed, his voice rising over the singer’s for a moment before he threw himself into the next song.

When Gerard could tear his eyes away from Frank, he saw Mikey and Alicia staring at the stage, looking equally as

impressed.

"Holy shit," Gerard said.

"Yeah," Mikey agreed, already typing something into his Blackberry.

"They're really good," Gerard said.

On stage, Frank shouted along to the song with his face pressed into the singer's neck. His black shirt was stained with sweat, and Gerard could see fresh rivulets sliding into his collar.

"Here," Alicia said, sliding her bottle of water towards Gerard. "You need this more than me."

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"What did you think?" Frank asked after, wiping the back of his neck with a towel. His whole body was so covered in sweat that it looked like he'd jumped into a pool with his clothes on. He looked *amazing*.

"Mikey really liked you guys. I think he's talking to your singer now," Gerard said, pointing to the two men at the bar.

Frank followed Gerard's finger and then looked back at him. "Luke has that covered. I want to know what *you* think."

"You were incredible," Gerard gushed before he could stop himself. They were only playing in front of a hundred kids tops, but Frank was a fucking rock star.

“Really, you think so?” Frank asked, giving Gerard another one of those beaming grins that left Gerard tongue-tied.

“You have, uh, a lot of energy.”

“It’s all the coffee,” Frank confessed with a wink. “Come on, I want to introduce you to the other guys.”

Gerard followed as Frank weaved between people, his smaller body slipping easily through while Gerard lumbered behind him mumbling apologies. Halfway to the bar, Frank took off at a run and leapt onto the back of some unsuspecting blonde guy.

“I swear to fucking god, Iero,” the guy said, “one of these days I’m going to drop you on your ass.” When he turned around, Gerard saw that it was the drummer from Frank’s band.

“You do that all the time, Bob,” Frank said, laughing. “It’s worth the risk. This is Gerard.”

“Hi,” Gerard said, giving a little wave.

“Hey, what’s up,” Bob said.

“Gerard is my most loyal customer at the ‘Bucks, and he’s an artist,” Frank said. “Bob’s my drummer.”

“*Your* drummer?” Bob repeated.

“That’s right,” Frank confirmed. “I own your ass, Bryar.”

Gerard cleared his throat and resolutely pushed away the twinge of jealousy he felt at the familiarity between the two of them. “Good set tonight.”

“Thanks,” Bob said.

"Gerard thinks I'm *incredible*," Frank added, making Gerard flush with embarrassment. "He said you were okay."

"I didn't..." Gerard started, but Bob's snort interrupted his denial.

"An incredible pain in the ass is more like it," he said.

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When the place had cleared out, Gerard and Mikey sat with the four members of Collateral Damage. Alicia had gone home an hour before. They pushed two tables together and everyone was drinking except for Gerard who had a Diet Coke and Frank who stuck with water, despite Gerard's insistence that he didn't have to.

It was a tight fit for all six of them, even with the two tables, so Gerard found himself sitting with his whole side pressed against Frank.

While the five guys nailed out a time to meet at the Eyeball offices, Gerard hunkered down inside his hoodie. He pulled a pen out from the middle pocket and started doodling on a bar napkin, doing his best to ignore the way that the heat of Frank's still sweaty body soaked into his skin.

"What are you drawing?" Frank asked, some minutes later.  
"Is that a *dragon*?"

"Oh," Gerard said, glancing up to find everyone staring at him. "Yes?"

Frank reached over. "Can I see it?"

"Sure," Gerard said, suddenly self-conscious. "I was just messing around, it's not that good."

“Are you kidding?” Frank said as he examined it. “It’s fucking awesome! Bob, look at this!”

“Cool,” he agreed on an exhale, smoke trailing out of his mouth as he spoke.

“Can I keep it?” Frank asked.

Gerard turned to him, surprised. “I guess, if you want to.”

“Thanks!” Frank said. He folded the napkin carefully and tucked it into his pants pocket.

Mikey shot Gerard a significant look before continuing, “Like I was saying though, Tuesday’s probably the best day to meet with Alex.”

\*\*\*

On Monday when he went to Starbucks, he was greeted with a giant chalk copy of his dragon on the drink of the day board.

“Do you like it?” Frank asked from the counter. “It’s not as good as yours, obviously, but I didn’t think you’d mind.”

The picture was less detailed than Gerard’s original drawing, but this dragon was holding a steaming cup of coffee.

“It’s great!” Gerard enthused. He bit the inside of his cheek to hold in the giant, cheesy smile that wanted to surface.

“Thanks. I tried to give him a foam mustache, but it didn’t come out right,” Frank said. “I bet you could do better.”

“I don’t know, I like yours,” Gerard said.

Frank looked down and grinned. “The usual?”

“Yeah,” Gerard said.

“Okay. Hey, are you doing anything today at three?” Frank asked as he began putting together Gerard’s frappuccino.

“I’m working. Why?” Gerard asked.

“Well, if you get done early or whatever, I’m playing in a kickball game, and you should come.”

“Kickball?” Gerard repeated incredulously.

Frank laughed. “My cousin’s class is having a student/parent kickball game, and my aunt and uncle both work, so I said I’d go.”

“Where is it?”

“Washington Elementary. You know where that is?” Frank asked.

“It’s on the way to my studio,” Gerard admitted. “Maybe if I get some time I’ll drop by.”

\*\*\*

Gerard made the mistake of telling Mikey about it when he called.

“I’ll pick you up in twenty minutes,” Mikey said.

“What?” Gerard said, startled. “No.”

“It’s after three already and you won’t go by yourself. Twenty minutes, be ready. And, you know, if you decided to

take another shower between now and then it wouldn't be..."

Gerard hung up on him.

\*\*\*

They arrived at the school to find the school parking lot almost completely full and a crowd of parents gathered around the playground.

"This way," Mikey said.

They found a seat on the bleachers and Gerard searched for Frank. The adults were playing in the outfield, and a quick scan showed Frank in left field.

"There he is," Gerard said, gesturing out to where Frank was bouncing on the balls of his feet and yelling encouragement at the mom who was pitching.

"Frank!" Mikey called waving an arm at him.

Frank looked over and grinned, waving back. The boy kicking popped out to the pitcher and Frank whooped, running over to Mikey and Gerard.

"You came!" he said.

"Yeah," Gerard agreed. "Sorry we're late."

"It's cool. This is the last inning though. Damn, these ten year olds are good." He pointed out to second base. "See the girl with the pigtails? That's my cousin, Casey."

"She's taller than you," Gerard observed.

“Fuck off,” Frank laughed. “I get my height from my mom’s side, okay?”

“What grade are these kids in?” Mikey asked.

“Fourth,” Frank responded. “And they’re vicious. The short stop tripped me while I was running to third.”

“Frank, you’re up!” a dad yelled.

“Gotta go,” Frank said. “Wait for me after, okay?”

“Okay,” Gerard agreed.

\*\*\*

“We beat you!” Frank’s cousin crowed afterward, dancing around Frank and making her pigtails shake.

“Five to four,” Frank said defensively. “That was close, and we’re not young like you guys.”

“Yeah, but you have longer legs,” she said.

“Not Frank,” Mikey pointed out as he and Gerard reached them on the field.

“That’s true,” Casey mused.

“Case, these are my friends, Gerard and Mikey,” Frank introduced.

“Hey,” she said, suddenly much more shy. “I’m going by Sharon and Becky now, okay?”

“Sure,” Frank said, “but we’re leaving in a few minutes. Your Mom’s gonna be home, and I promised we’d help her with dinner.”

"Yeah, yeah," Casey moaned, rolling her eyes. "Whatever you say, Frankie."

She ran off after two girls playing with a jump rope in the middle of the field. Frank watched her a minute and then turned back to them, shaking his head.

"I think if I lived with her, I'd have to kill her," he said seriously.

There was an awkward silence for a moment before Mikey gave Gerard a subtle elbow to the kidneys.

"Good game?" Gerard said. It came out more of a question than he would have liked.

"Thanks. I don't remember kids being that brutal. Really, did you see the short stop? I'm pretty sure he's a sociopath. Shit, it's so hot."

Gerard watched as Frank pulled his Misfits t-shirt up and over his head. Underneath was a whole new set of tattoos on his chest and along his waist. The word "and" was written under his belly button, and when he twisted to tuck his shirt in the back pocket of his jeans, Gerard saw that the whole phrase was "search and destroy" bracketed by two small birds.

Looking up, Gerard realized that he wasn't the only person staring at Frank. Plenty of the mothers and even a dad or two had their eyes on Frank. Some seemed disapproving, but most of them were watching him in the same lustful way as Gerard.

"I have to take her home, and I did promise my aunt that I'd stay for dinner, but do you want to do something after?" Frank asked.

Gerard hesitated. "I can't," he said honestly. "I have to finish working."

"On stuff for your gallery. The one that's no big deal, right," Frank said.

Gerard tried to hide his flinch. "Yeah. There's this one piece that I'm working on that I need to get back to."

That was true. Gerard already felt his fingers itching to draw those birds and recreate the intricate lettering of the "search and destroy."

"Well, thanks for coming," Frank said. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Yeah," Gerard said.

"Bye, Mikey," Frank said.

"See you," Mikey said.

Frank took off towards his cousin, which gave Gerard a good view of his back. There was a maniacally grinning jack-o-lantern between his shoulder blades, under the phrase "keep the faith." Gerard wondered what it meant. He wondered what they *all* meant.

"Just so you know, this right now is why I call you a stalker," Mikey said from beside him, pulling Gerard out of his studying.

"Shut up," Gerard said.

\*\*\*

That night, he experimented with putting the birds together with the cobra, bats and scorpion, but it ended up looking

like a zoo. Instead, putting the birds around the Lady of Sorrows made balanced it out more evenly.

When he finished, he pulled out all the individual sketches he'd made and spread them out on his table, trying to make sense of them, to figure out how to put them together and what he was trying to say.

\*\*\*

The night of the showing came quickly, and before he knew it, Gerard was triple checking everything and glad-handing the art critics and patrons milling around.

The centerpiece of the whole showing was called *Frank's Lament*, named in a fit of emo that Gerard would never admit to. He settled on keeping it black, red and white with some bright slashes of yellow over the Lady of Sorrow's eyes and coiled around the "revenge" banner in the corner. Gerard was pretty satisfied with the way it turned out.

"Wow, this is really good," Ray said when he reached the painting.

"Thanks," Gerard said.

"Has Frank seen it?" Ray asked. When Gerard opened his mouth to answer said, "Never mind, here he comes."

Gerard whirled around to see Frank browsing the paintings just as Mikey slipped beside him. "Did I forget to mention that I invited him?"

"Oh my god. Oh my god," Gerard said, feeling his stomach drop to somewhere around his knees. "He's going to think I'm a stalker."

"You *are* a stalker," Mikey said, "but I don't think he'll mind."

"Oh my god," Gerard said again. He was going to throw up, right in the middle of his own fucking showing.

"Wait, does he not know you did this?" Ray asked, looking between him and Mikey.

"Oh my god," Gerard repeated faintly.

"Hey," Frank said when he reached them. He seemed oddly shy. "Mikey said you had something to show me?"

"No," Gerard said. "I don't..." He frantically tried to come up with a way to distract Frank before he noticed the gigantic fucking love note to him behind Gerard's head.  
"Let's go somewhere..."

But Frank wasn't listening to him anymore. "Is that..." He moved around Gerard's body and studied the painting for long, silent moments. Gerard wished for a convenient ledge to jump off of.

"It's not...I can explain," Gerard said desperately when he could no longer handle the quiet. Frank held up a hand and Gerard stopped talking.

"Seriously, shut up," Frank said and Gerard jerked his head down until his chin touched his chest. "I don't know what you're thinking here, so let me tell you what I am instead, okay? I think you're awesome, and I want to watch horror movies and read comic books with you. I want to make you coffee in my apartment. I have this shitty little coffee machine, but I can still rock it."

Gerard cut his eyes up to look at Frank in disbelief. "What?"

"I'm trying to clear up the confusion here, because apparently the two of us aren't on the same wavelength," Frank said. "Also, I really want to have sex with you."

Gerard stared at him, knowing his eyes were doing the wide, anime thing that Mikey always made fun of him for, but he couldn't help it. He was gobsmacked. This was not the way he expected this conversation, should they ever have it, to go.

It didn't help that Mikey, the bastard, was fucking dying laughing next to Gerard.

"Um, now?" Gerard asked when his voice returned.

Frank stared at him for a second and then said, "You know what? Fuck it. Yes, right now."

\*\*\*

"Do you really think it was a good idea to leave Mikey in charge?" Frank asked. He spoke directly into Gerard's collarbone as his tongue did something slippery and wonderful down there.

"It was only for a little while," Gerard said, "and he's listened to me talk about all of those paintings enough that I know he can answer any questions. Ohgod." Gerard stumbled back against a row of shelves, and rolls of paper towels and toilet paper dropped around their feet.

Frank dropped to the floor along with them. It was possible that Gerard's eyes were never going to return to their original size.

"Frankie," he breathed, watching in awe as Frank unbuttoned his black slacks.

Frank laughed, smiling up at him. “We’re going to have to do this at the store after hours. I’ve had too many fantasies about that for it not to happen.”

“Un...” Gerard broke off on a choked groan when Frank took his cock into his mouth. “Unsanitary.”

Frank pulled off long enough to say, “I don’t give a fuck” before diving back in. Gerard shut his eyes, threaded one hand through Frank’s hair and used the other to clutch at the now-empty shelf behind him.

When he was finished, Frank stood up and Gerard yanked him in for a kiss.

“Frank, oh, Frankie,” he whispered, unbuttoning Frank’s jeans and slipping his hand inside Frank’s underwear to free his hard cock.

“Shit, yeah,” Frank moaned, tucking his face against Gerard’s neck and fisting a hand in the back of Gerard’s dress shirt.

“I’m sorry I’m so creepy,” Gerard said.

Frank pulled back and looked at him. “What do you mean?”

“The touching? The *painting*?” Gerard asked.

Frank closed his eyes and returned to his place hiding in Gerard’s neck. His words buzzed against Gerard’s skin. “Are you kidding? That’s the coolest fucking thing I’ve ever seen. I’m gonna buy it, okay? How much does it cost?”

“\$900,” Gerard answered.

"Shit, really?" Frank said, sounding impressed. "Maybe I'm not going to buy it."

"Also, it's, uh, already sold," Gerard admitted.

"Forget it, you can make me another one," Frank said.

Gerard stroked Frank's cock fast and tight as Frank's breathing became ragged.

"I'm drawing a comic where we're both superheroes," Gerard revealed.

"Awesome," Frank said and came all over Gerard's hand.

\*\*\*

The next morning, after the showing and another round of spectacular sex, this time in Gerard's bed, Gerard woke up with

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written down the middle of his chest in Sharpie and Frank curled around him, cackling madly.

Then Frank apologized with a long, sloppy, enthusiastic blowjob that had Gerard silently agreeing with his new

tattoo in the brief few moments before his brain whited out completely.

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